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BOWLING - BIG BUSINESS, AND GETTING BIGGER

AS incomes continue to rise, the work week grows shorter and vacations grow longer, more time and money are spent on recreation. Never before has the world of sport been blessed with such prosperity. This is especially true of participating sports. Some spectator sports have been hard hit by television, but fishing, hunting, swimming, boating, motoring, camping, and other participating sports have never before been so bountifully blessed with prosperity. One of the most blessed of all is the sport of bowling.

Introduced in North America by Dutch colonists more than 325 years ago, the then ancient game achieved wide popularity. Then, and for some time after, the game was played out of doors on a "bowling green." The first covered alleys were roofed only and were made of pounded clay or slate. In those days, only nine pins, arranged in diamond form, were used. However, in the early 1800's the game of "nine-pins" was prohibited by law and a tenth pin was added in a successful effort to circumvent this restrictive legislation. Thus the game which is played today by more than 22,000,000 Americans has come down to us with remarkably little change since the Middle Ages.

Although the game itself has changed comparatively little, the equipment has undergone tremendous improvement in the last 100 years. This improvement has been particularly marked since the late 1930's. Up until then, bowling alleys were strictly functional. Bowlers didn't especially care if the alleys were laid out in cow barns so long as they were smooth and the pinboys moved like lightning (and in those days a good many of them did).

Today the accent is on convenience, comfort and color. New bowling centers in low, rakish buildings surrounded by wide parking areas dot the outlying districts. Their interiors are done in soft and restful colors, seasoned with just the right amount of chrome. The wooden benches and uncomfortable chairs have given way to sleek, upholstered semicircular booths for the bowlers, and cushioned seats for the spectators. Naturally, air-conditioning is a must.

Most change springs from economic force or expectations. This is certainly true of the change in detail and design going into the new bowling centers and the renovation and refurbishing of the old. Economic force has likewise powered what promises to be the most revolutionary change in bowling alley operation. For years the pinboy has been as necessary to the game as the pins, and for years pinboys have presented an increasingly difficult labor problem for bowling alley operators. They have not only grown scarcer, particularly in the outlying areas;

they have become more costly (as has everything else). They have not only grown reluctant to work the peculiar hours most bowling centers must keep; some of them work less swiftly and efficiently while they are on the job. However, help has finally come. An automatic pin-setting machine has been on the market for the past several years. More than 8,000 of them are now in operation and about 2,500 are being installed annually. At this rate it will take a long time to replace all of the recalcitrant pinboys, but a second company has produced its pin-setting machine and, in all probability, the field will be entered by others.

Without trying to argue the relative merits of pinboys versus machines from the bowlers' standpoint, it is safe to say that the machine has several distinct advantages for the bowling alley operator. First of all, the machine largely solves his labor problem by virtually eliminating it. The solution is not complete because he still has to have a maintenance man around to adjust the machines that occasionally get out of kilter. Nevertheless, the personnel problem is lessened considerably by the installation of automatic pin-setting equipment. Secondly, and perhaps of greater importance, automatic pin-setting machines allow around-the-clock operation 365 days of the year. The popularity of bowling being what it is, 24-hour operation can boost gross income perhaps as much as 50%, and in unusual cases even more.

Automatic pin-setters are not the only new equipment to tempt alley operators. The American Machine and Foundry Company (manufacturers of the first fully automatic pin-setter) has introduced a ball return trough that is installed beneath the floor. Aside from the obvious appeal of any new and tricky equipment, the new ball return will eliminate the old-style return rack. It will also give a cleaner, less cluttered look to the alleys to go with their modern decor.

All of this comfort, convenience, and color has not been overlooked by the ladies. In 1940, membership in the Women's International Bowling Congress numbered slightly less than 82,000. In a short 15 years their number has grown to more than 700,000. Time was when most bowlers were male and over 30. With the number of women bowlers increasing rapidly and high school bowling leagues springing up across the country, this is no longer true. It's a game the whole family understands and enjoys.

Despite the expansion of the last few years, there is still plenty of opportunity for new bowling alleys, or for making over old ones. While location is important, the range of selectivity is much greater than in the location of a supermarket, drug store or other type of retail establishment. Suburban locations with plenty of parking, in middle-income districts, are good. So are locations in industrial and business districts. As is the case in all successful enterprises, good management is a vital ingredient. In this instance it requires salesmanship, a talent for promotion, understanding and love of the game, and a willingness to work long and peculiar hours - say from noon to midnight 7 days a week.

Income and expenses will naturally vary with the size of the operation and with its geographic location. Most authorities believe that a 16-alley center is about all one man can manage effectively. This size operation will require a one-

story, no basement building of 100' x 140'. All of the necessary furnishings and equipment will cost from \$3,500 to \$4,000 per alley, or, in this instance, about \$60,000. If fully automatic pin-setters are used, the cost will go up about \$500 per alley. The operator can rent his building and finance his equipment, so the necessary cash to start operating is considerably less than the \$60,000 equipment charge. Terms will vary, but one-third down and the balance over a 2- to 3-year period is a good average.

Rents will vary tremendously also. In the St. Louis area they will range from \$30 per alley per month for the poorer alleys up to \$75 per alley per month for the best ones. Average is about \$50. Leases are made for terms varying from 2 years up to 25 years, with alterations paid by the lessor in some cases and the lessee in others. Percentage leases are becoming more popular, usually at about 10%, although high-volume alleys may get by with an 8% deal.

A fairly substantial 16-alley bowling center in the St. Louis area will gross about \$95,000 to \$100,000 per year. Income and expense figures on such an operation would look something like this. (Although many bowling centers operate in conjunction with restaurants or cocktail lounges, the following figures pertain to the bowling activities only.)

INCOME

48 "lines" (games) per alley per day for 270 days @ 40¢
 $48 \times 16 \times 270 \times \$0.40 = \$82,944$

24 "lines" (games) per alley per day for 90 days @ 40¢
 $24 \times 16 \times 90 \times \$0.40 = \$13,824$

Total = \$96,768 Call \$96,000

EXPENSES

Assistant manager @ \$70 per week	.....	\$ 3,640
Maintenance man @ \$80 per week	.....	4,160
Pinboys - 240,000 games @ 11¢	.....	<u>26,400</u>
Total Labor	.....	\$34,200

Rent - \$50 per alley per month	.....	\$ 9,600
Lights - \$8 per alley per month	.....	1,540
Heat - \$40 per alley per year	.....	640
Air-conditioning - \$55 per alley per year	.....	880
Promotion	.....	<u>1,500</u>
Total Operating	.....	14,160

Pin replacements - 80 sets @ \$25	.....	\$ 2,000
Sand and resurface alleys @ \$35	.....	560
General repairs and decorating	.....	<u>500</u>
Total Maintenance	.....	3,060

Insurance, including compensation and liability	.....	\$ 1,000
Licenses @ \$30 per alley*	480
Total Fixed	1,480

Depreciation charge - 10% on \$60,000 equipment	<u>6,000</u>
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TOTAL EXPENSE	58,900
Net income before deducting operator's salary	\$37,100

*\$20 Federal tax; \$5 State of Missouri; \$5 City of St. Louis.

Out of this income the new operator will probably have to pay something over \$20,000 per year for the first 2 years (or about \$14,000 if his equipment is financed over a 3-year period). This will leave \$17,100, out of which he must pay himself a salary for the 80-hour weeks he has put in.

These figures cannot be called average, nor should they be applied willy-nilly to any 16-alley operation. However, they do show what a well-run and well-located bowling center may be expected to accomplish.

No article on bowling alley operation would be complete without some discussion of bowling leagues. They are made up of teams from business and industrial groups, labor unions, service clubs, high schools, fraternal organizations, and virtually any other group that can get together enough bowlers. There are leagues for women, leagues for men, teen-age leagues and leagues made up of husband-and-wife teams. In most areas league play dominates a good part of the evening bowling hours and is enormously important to the success of new and old bowling centers. Any new operator will find it almost mandatory to line up several leagues to bowl at his alleys before he starts operation.

The same factors that have led to the sweeping popularity of bowling can be expected to keep operating in its favor. First are those inherent in the characteristics of the game. It is so simple that anyone can play it. At the same time it is filled with the complexities of any game of form. Most high-average bowlers have spent hour upon hour mastering the idiosyncrasies of backswing, ball release, follow-through, loft, hook, and body English (this last is of psychological benefit only). Thus it is a game at which the neophyte can achieve some measure of instant success and encouragement, and a game in which perfection eludes the most faithful and persistent expert. For this reason it has a continuing fascination for the participant because no bowler ever feels that he has really mastered the game.

Another factor of high appeal is that bowling does not require the participant to buy any equipment. Most bowlers eventually buy their own shoes and ball, but it is not necessary for them to tie up any money in these items unless they want to. They can always play in rented shoes, and the ball is furnished by the alley.

Bowling is also a relaxing game. In league play, with five players on a team, the bowler is sitting down at least 80% of the time. It need not be a strenuous game; bowling and athletics are not necessarily synonymous. Furthermore, it does not require strength or agility. This means that the game can be played by almost anyone regardless of his physical shortcomings.

Finally, the game is played in pleasant and at times luxurious surroundings, and if a cocktail lounge is operated in conjunction with the bowling alley, it is possible to participate in two pastimes simultaneously. This last advantage will not be lost on those people who make such a fetish of saving time.


TOM McREYNOLDS